# 'My name is not Tom'

Hannah-Rose Murray

# "My Name is Not Tom":
# Josiah Henson's Fight to Reclaim His Identity in Britain, 1876-1877


## Abstract

Formerly enslaved African American Josiah Henson travelled to Britain in 1876 to much fanfare and excitement. Regarded as the inspiration of 'Uncle Tom' from Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* the British public flocked to hear Henson speak. However, Henson had to work against the stereotypes associated with the character and the racist caricatures of black people prevalent in the 1870s. Henson fought against the twisted memory of slavery and sought to remind British audiences of the violent nature of the institution. This was complicated by Britain's investment in a narrative I term 'superior displacement': British society remembered slavery through the act of forgetting, which placed greater emphasis on the American memory of slavery and ignoring its own past with the slave trade and its subsequent legacies. Abolitionists and reformers often made Henson's battle more difficult too, and sometimes politicized his life and impact for their own ends, most clearly demonstrated in *The Young People's Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom's Story of His Life,* published in 1877. Regardless of such complex dynamics, Henson reasserted his identity and rejected the epithet of 'Uncle Tom' whenever he could.


The cataclysmic end of the American Civil War signalled the decline in black abolitionist transatlantic journeys to Britain. Between 1876 and 1895, only three activists received extensive coverage in the British press: Josiah Henson, Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells. They exploited their travelling celebrity to remind British audiences that slavery was not dead and indeed that its spectre continued to haunt not only them but all African Americans in the United States. Whilst British interest in black activist missions waned, the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and the fascination with the American South proved as popular as ever, and the novel was used as a springboard to discuss plantation life or the conditions faced by black Americans. One review of a London theatre performance in February 1875 commented:

> […] the black man is far less sentimentally viewed than formerly. His wrongs have been very completely redressed, in so much that it is now perhaps rather the poor planter than the afflicted negro who is entitled to seek commiseration at the hands of the public.[1]

[1] *The Pall Mall Gazette* (17 February 1875), 12.

A few days later, another review went further and declared it "is like slaying the slain for George Harris now to protest against the atrocities of American slavedrivers" and Uncle Tom "for all his sanctity was something of a bore".[2] Stowe's novel encouraged people to see the enslaved in a sympathetic light, but a decade after the end of the War many Britons began investing in the stereotype that black people were lazy and were better off enslaved. Since slavery was long dead and their suffering had supposedly ended with it, reports of African American inferiority, laziness and supposed lack of progress influenced society. Stowe's characters no longer evoked pity or empathy and there was little point in continuing to invest in the story because of abolition. The character of Uncle Tom in particular was a dull, submissive figure whose long-term suffering mattered little in the contemporary climate.

Such reviews and commentaries of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sparked debate across the country, and despite the lacklustre reviews quoted above, performances continued in abundance. Part of a wider trend within Britain's fascination with plantation life in literature, performances and travel narratives, the common theme uniting these was the erasure of slavery's reality, which became more entrenched as the appetite for such material increased. A number of diaries and travel accounts of experiences in the South were published in the British press, where stories of '"genuine niggers' in every variety of costume" formed a staple image in the public mind.[3] When formerly enslaved African American Josiah Henson visited Britain in 1876, he achieved extraordinary fame and fanfare because of his association with the novel: Stowe had based her character of 'Uncle Tom' on Henson after reading his narrative. His celebrity also stemmed from a British fascination with the American South. Through fiction and some dramatic performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Henson was a 'memento', someone or something to remind others of American slavery, and descriptions of him and his fight against slavery were often written in romantic language. His testimony implied he was a last remnant of slavery, a living memorial, and his books were souvenirs to bolster the romance of abolition and served to represent a time – far in the past – in which an inevitable conflict took place. This extremely narrow field through which he navigated presented complications, and Henson walked a tightrope on the British stage between declaring his independence and accepting racist Victorian norms.

---

[2] *The Morning Post* (13 February 1875), 6.
[3] *Manchester Times* (8 January 1876), 14; *The Morning Post* (6 September 1883), 6.

In this chapter I will argue that Henson had to work against the stereotypes associated with Stowe's character and the racist caricatures of black people prevalent in the 1870s. This was complicated by Britain's investment in a narrative of deliberate forgetting I term 'superior displacement': British society remembered slavery through the act of forgetting, which placed greater emphasis on the American memory of slavery and ignored its own past with the slave trade and its subsequent legacies. As Marcus Wood writes in his seminal work *Blind Memory,* efforts to depict the enslaved experience is "a history fraught with irony, paradox, voyeurism and erasure". The history of slavery "must not be encapsulated within a history believed to be stable, digested and understood; this history is also *not over*, and is *evolving*".[4] As a formerly enslaved individual who could identify the legacy of slavery in transatlantic society and how it was constantly evolving in the 1870s, Henson fought against the twisted memory of slavery, and sought to remind British audiences of the violent nature of the institution. Abolitionists and reformers often made Henson's battle more difficult however, and sometimes politicized his life and impact for their own ends, most clearly demonstrated in *The Young People's Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom's Story of His Life,* published in 1877. John Lobb, Henson's white British benefactor, excerpted sections from Henson's Narrative and placed them alongside his own extensive commentary, reframing Henson's memory of slavery for his own religious purposes.

Ultimately, Henson sought to prove that formerly enslaved individuals were not just scarred bodies, and despite his white benefactors' exploitation of his literary connection to Stowe's novel, Henson found any means necessary to reject a characterization that was not his own. He challenged audience perceptions that he was *the* Uncle Tom and fought against the passivity and unassertive nature of that character in myriad ways. He aimed to prove slavery was not entirely dead and its memory should be kept alive, and argued against the idea he or anyone else discussing slavery was akin to 'slaying the slain'.

**The British narrative of 'superior displacement'**

When Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, British audiences quickly became obsessed with the novel and in October of that year alone there were ten different editions published in two weeks, jumping to over forty editions by the close of 1853.

[4] Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 8-11.

Altogether, the novel sold roughly 1,500,000 copies in Britain, and the public eagerly consumed spin-off volumes, plays, merchandise and even wallpaper.[5] The novel further inspired paintings in the Royal Academy, panoramas, and by the end of 1852 there were eleven different dramatic interpretations of *Uncle Tom* being performed across the country, including four pantomimes in time for Christmas. In these circumstances the story of abolition was a commoditized product that sparked huge interest in nearly every corner of Britain, in what Audrey Fisch describes as the "general commercialization of American abolitionism". Roughly twenty slave narratives were also published during the same era in Britain to capitalize on the novel's success and feed a demand for authentic stories of slavery.[6]

The British obsession with American slavery unfolded into a narrative – 'superior displacement' – which waxed and waned in the wake of the novel's publication but remained an essential part of literary and performative stories throughout the nineteenth century. Britain refused to acknowledge its role in the slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean in popular culture, as it did not fit the abolitionist narrative which had already become entrenched in society. Britain was seen to be an antislavery nation at heart and *morally superior* to America: the image of Britannia became a popular figure in visual, print and performance rhetoric when the opportunity arose to shame America into realizing their sin of slavery. As Edward Ziter argues of Victorian stories concerning the Orient, tales of the exotic set in the Middle East and Egypt were woven into narratives on stage that not only depicted Britain as culturally and racially superior, but were also popular because "of its spatial and cultural distance from London".[7] This geographical distance from the Caribbean and America allowed Britain to construct a narrative which deliberately erased its own racial conflict and memory of slavery in favour of the well-known story of American slavery.

Mocking America not only proved morally and culturally acceptable, but profitable too. Southern plantation life pre- and post-1865 was thus incorporated into a larger transatlantic cultural narrative where British land was – echoing abolitionist and jingoistic rhetoric – a place where slaves could walk free. The stories of formerly enslaved individuals remained popular as a part of this displacement myth, and these black figures were championed as fighters of freedom from American evils: many began to believe that the "story of the American negro

---

5 Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 21.

6 Audrey Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University of Press, 2000), 13-14, 52-5.

7 Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11-19, 24, 45-6.

would someday be regarded as the romance of our age".[8] The romance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, enslaved individuals and the splendor of plantations bled into British society and became intertwined with racial thought and popular entertainment, perpetuating not only racial stereotypes but also the idea that slavery was dead and gone. As racial attitudes hardened in the mid to late nineteenth century in Britain due to the rise of scientific racism, depictions of the characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – particularly on playbills and broadsides – were reduced to crude stereotypes. Even Stowe herself summed up traits of this narrative; after the War, she visited old plantation cabins in the South and wrote "just remember that this great sorrow of slavery has gone, gone by forever… I see men very happy in their lowly lot." As Ethan J. Kytle remarks, "Uncle Tom's suffering, it seems, had died with the institution of slavery".[9]

The high regard many Britons had for the antebellum past in general can partly be explained by British investment in sentimentalism and melodrama which surrounded literary works and performances that used slavery and its memory as motifs. Before the Civil War, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* represents the pinnacle of abolitionist melodrama, and romantic theatrical scenes – so famous in the novel such as Eliza's escape over the icy Ohio River – were meticulously planned and performed on the British stage. Immortalized in song, performance and illustrated playbills, the many illustrations of characters from Stowe's novel were sometimes interspersed with images or lyrics celebrating the freedom of Britain and sometimes even depicting Britannia herself. Novels, plays, and other performances emphasized the world of slavery as a purely American issue, displacing any considerations of Britain's own part in the slave trade. British newspapers and reviews of the novel often highlighted the so-called 'problem' of slavery, fueling a narrative of moral superiority because of Britain's role in abolition. America, on the other hand, had failed to live up to its infamous Declaration of Independence and was shamed by the sin of slavery.[10] Sarah Meer argues that other novels and performances spun-off from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sometimes took creative licence with the plot of the novel, for example portraying slave revolts and violence: this was easier for British rather than American audiences to imagine because of the former's geographical distance from slavery. Plays

---

8 *Western Mail* (Cardiff) (8 January 1870), 7.

9 Ethan J. Kytle, *Romantic Reformers and the Antislavery Struggle in the Civil War Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 270-2.

10 Denise Kohn, Sarah Meer and Emily B. Todd, "Introduction", in Denise Kohn et al., eds, *Transatlantic Stowe: Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), xi-xxi.

mentioning Canada would result in cheers from the audience, as the popular notion that slaves 'walked free' on British soil was celebrated.[11]

Since the first publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* such images had always accompanied the text and became a staple in British editions. Indeed, we can trace the narrative of superior displacement around Stowe's work to these first British editions. During the mid-nineteenth century, the process of engraving became more efficient and cheap illustrated novels became the norm. These illustrated versions in Britain were instantly popular and sold more copies than other forms of the novel. The story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* thus became inseparable from images depicting the central characters. These illustrations would appear in the novel but also in magazines, song sheets, and advertisements, so Victorian society would have been extremely familiar with the figures of Topsy, Eva and Uncle Tom.[12] In these illustrated versions, Julia Thomas argues, publishers were at pains to point out the differences between American and British society, particularly that slavery was a distinctly American problem. These images had a larger meaning in which themes of race, nationhood and identity influenced how they were read. British illustrated versions often employed notions of moral superiority to highlight American evils and the sins of their society. The London publishing houses Clarke & Company and Routledge, for example, changed the title from "Life Among the Lowly" to "Negro Life in the Southern States of America", and one version included a whipping scene on the back cover. Within these novels, illustrations reiterated this view and encouraged readers to associate slavery with America and assume that Britain was far removed from such cruelty and sin. These images provided an ideology for the novel's readers, and replaced America and cast Britain instead as the 'land of the free'.[13]

In Britain, performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continued throughout the century, simultaneously reframing the memory of slavery through the novel's characters. Historians, however – including Sarah Meer in her seminal work on the novel's afterlife – have neglected to consider the novel's impact on British society beyond the American Civil War, an impact that cannot be separated from the context of Henson's visit. There the characters of Tom and Topsy were twisted into racial stereotypes on stage: Tom was a passive and pious old man, whereas Topsy was a mischievous and 'wicked' figure who loved to spurn white authority and speak in plantation dialect. Playbills and advertisements exploited these stereotypes even

---

11 Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 140-9.

12 Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 22-8, 34.

13 Ibid., 38-51.

further, portraying the two figures with bulging eyes and thick lips, branding Topsy in particular as a 'pickaninny' and one of the main attractions.[14] For example, an 1895 song sheet entitled 'Uncle Tom' illustrated two famous scenes representing Tom's character: reading scripture and mourning the death of Eva, two passive acts which reinforce his piety, modesty and quiet stillness. The song describes how audiences would "never forget" Tom, addressing his legacy and how such a gentle, passive and loyal friend will live on in the hearts and minds of all those against slavery. The memory of Tom, however, is twisted into a minstrelesque figure who is known for his relationship to Eva and his unassertive nature, which for many came to represent many black people.[15]

The market for slave stories in Britain clearly experienced a revival in the 1870s too, and Henson's visit helps us to understand the politicized nature of the memory of slavery. By this time, the cultural legacy of the novel had become entrenched in British society, and plays and books continued to pay direct or indirect homage to the original either through direct or indirect comparisons. This evolving legacy meant Henson was not only fighting the association with the character of Uncle Tom in the original novel, but also wrestling with numerous later versions of that character from unassertive to racially twisted stereotype. Marcus Wood argues that Henson was "paraded around the country as the living embodiment of the good Christian ex-slave" and that his visit created a "sensation", reawakening public interest in Stowe's novel and visiting black lecturers. As Wood succinctly argues, the "memory of slavery [became] represented within the factualised fictions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*".[16] Formerly enslaved individuals had to perform memories that were not always their own construction, in the sense that white abolitionists crafted a cultural narrative based on Stowe's novel which black individuals were often expected to conform to. These cultural narratives primarily encouraged whites to pity formerly enslaved individuals and to empathize with their pain.[17] Henson had to wrestle with these competing versions of Uncle Tom and provide a model of black performance and resistance at a time when fictional and racist depictions of black people had become the norm.

---

[14] Kytle, *Romantic Reformers* (note 9), 270-2. For *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its impact after 1865 in America, see Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

[15] "Uncle Tom", written by J.P. Harrington, composed by George Le Brunn (London: B. Mocatta & Co, 1895), see British Library London, Music Collections H.3602.a(47).

[16] Wood, *Blind Memory* (note 4), 196-8.

[17] Douglas A. Jones, Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 140.

**A "negro preacher" and a British celebrity**

Aside from Marcus Wood and the art historian Jan Marsh, scholars have largely ignored Henson's third high-profile visit to Britain, which is surprising considering Henson's popularity, the impact he had on British society and his active resistance to racism.[18] Henson visited Britain in 1876 to ask for British donations to pay off personal debt for his farm in Canada, and sought out reformers and old abolitionist friends to help him raise money to overcome these financial difficulties. As a result of his famous association with Stowe's novel, he received over two thousand invitations to speak. He was a powerful orator, and newspaper correspondents waxed lyrical about his impressive stage presence. Most of the press paragraphs discussing him were reprinted almost verbatim from London to Liverpool, describing how Henson (the "original" Uncle Tom) "pictured [slavery] in a very effective way". The scars on his back testified to the cruelty of that system, many noted, and bore witness to the truth of Stowe's story.[19] In Sheffield for example, Henson gave two lectures in one day to thrilled audiences, one beginning at the unusual time of 12pm, the other later in the evening, clearly demonstrating that demand was high. Crowds of people turned up an hour and a half early to get a seat despite the "hour and the inclemency of the weather".[20] According to his white benefactor and editor John Lobb, Henson addressed over 500,000 people during his 1870s visit and many of the meetings were as popular as the one in Sheffield. Lobb wielded significant influence as editor of the *Christian Age* magazine and utilized his contacts throughout the country to organize Henson's lecturing schedule.[21]

Although Henson was a successful author in his own right (the first edition of his narrative sold over two thousand copies in 1849, and over six thousand in the first three years before Stowe's novel was published), it was undoubtedly his association with the novel that prompted an invitation to meet the Queen at Windsor Castle in 1877.[22] In the 1850s, Queen Victoria was

---

18 Jan Marsh, "From Slave Cabin to Windsor Castle: Josiah Henson and 'Uncle Tom' in Britain", *19th Century Studies* 16 (2002), 37-50.

19 *The Morning Post* (London) (6 September 1876), 4; *Liverpool Mercury* (7 September 1876), 7; *Berrow's Worcester Journal* (9 September 1876), 6; *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (London) (10 September 1876), 8.

20 *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent* (30 January 1877), 6.

21 Josiah Henson, *Young People's Illustrated Edition: Uncle Tom's Story of his Life from 1789 to 1877,* ed. John Lobb (London: Christian Age, 1877), Author's Note.

22 Calvin Schermerhorn, "Arguing Slavery's Narrative: Southern Regionalists, Ex-slave Autobiographers and the Contested Literary Representations of the Peculiar Institution 1824-1849", *Journal of American Studies* 46.4 (November 2012), 1009-30 (p. 1030). Frances Smith Foster states that Henson's first narrative sold over 100,000 copies once Stowe credited his story with inspiring her novel (Frances Smith Foster,

advised not to meet Harriet Beecher Stowe in public, as ministers were fearful of upsetting Southerners who sold and transported cotton to Britain.[23] By the 1870s it was clearly safe for Henson to visit the palace but also talk openly about a novel that had divided so many. Henson presented her with a copy of his autobiography and in return received the Queen's portrait. She then asked Henson and John Lobb to sign their names in an album in the castle. They toured the grounds and the state apartments and left after roughly three hours.[24] The event was substantially covered in the press, and one newspaper – the *Birmingham Daily News* – described the meeting thus:

> There is something almost romantic in the meeting, in Royalty's own home, of the Queen of England with this humble and now aged Uncle Tom, whose only distinction arises from his sufferings, and the patient, sweet philosophy and great-hearted piety with which he bore the harshness of stern oppressors. We can picture the negro patriarch, now in his 88th year, passing up the corridor and into the Oak Room where her Majesty, surrounded by lords and ladies in waiting and officers of state, took him kindly by the hand and spoke generous words of sympathy for the sufferings he had undergone. The scene would be well worth immortalising on the canvas of some great historic painter. Nothing could be more picturesque than the pageantry and grandeur of the surroundings of which this venerable negro was the central figure […] The sweeping away of the slave system of the South was one of the noblest works ever achieved by any people; and the fire and sword through which the reformers had to pass were the harrowing trials of their noble mission.[25]

The press was evidently thrilled that the so-called 'Uncle Tom' was gracing British shores, and we see here the familiar patronizing trope of the pious, Christian suffering slave that is not only present in Stowe's novel but also in other white abolitionist literature. Henson's "only distinction" – that is the main reason why he met royalty – is because of his sufferings as a slave, and any mention of his agency and resistance (shown both during this visit and his previous journeys) is completely extinguished. Henson is reduced to a scarred, unassertive slave who witnessed extreme cruelty and can now happily be found in a palace which he was almost unfit to see. He is described as gentle, good-natured, without a penchant for violence, and his "sweet" disposition plays into the minstrel lore of the nineteenth century. The concept of white people as saviours is evidently at work here, and the kindness shown to him by royalty reflects the (white) moral superiority of Britain as an abolitionist nation as well as the

---

*Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 22).

23 Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania* (note 11), 163-5.

24 *Birmingham Daily Post* (6 March 1877), 5; *Liverpool Mercury* (6 March 1877), 7; *The Pall Mall Gazette* (6 March 1877), 6; *The Morning Post* (6 March 1877), 5.

25 *Birmingham Daily News* (6 March 1877), cited from Josiah Henson, *Uncle Tom's Story of His Life: The Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom") from 1789 to 1881* (London: Christian Age, 1877), 222-4.

superiority of the white race. This cultural narrative reflects the 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother' imagery where a kneeling slave is saved and helped by white men and paints the black man as unable to pull himself up from his misery and suffering.

According to the *Birmingham Daily News*, the meeting was historic and worth painting and preserving as a symbolic episode in the noble destruction of slavery itself. The theme of superior displacement as an act of deliberate forgetting is recurrent throughout the text, as Victorians would have regarded this meeting as emblematic in Britain's history of abolishing the slave trade and slavery much sooner than the Americans, and the former welcomed any slave or black man on their 'free soil' compared to the latter. Slavery was long dead, and the concept of a British monarch extending the hand of friendship and charity towards a former slave speaks to the deliberately constructed antislavery narrative Britons had woven into society since the end of slavery in the 1830s. Slavery was a sin, and the destruction of it in America (specifically creating and reframing that geographical distance) could only be achieved by the 'fire and sword' and the language here infuses slavery with a sense of biblical portent: slavery was always doomed to die, as the war was a Christian struggle against the moral evil of slavery, but could not be won without the trials and suffering of 'reformers'. Whilst the article is referring to Henson here, 'reformers' as a group would also refer to white activists, despite the fact the 'trials' of black and white individuals would have been vastly different.

British newspapers used Henson's visit to remind audiences of Britain's glorious past, but sometimes reformers themselves utilized black activist memories of slavery for their own advantage. For example, John Lobb politicized Henson's memory to publish a religious text of Henson's life specifically designed for children: the *Young People's Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom's Story of His Life* (published by the *Christian Age* in 1877). Children's books typically infantilized African Americans and made them figures of childlike innocence subjected to heartbreak and suffering, representing tools to teach young people the art of being a good Christian, which was no doubt the aim because of Lobb's position as editor of the *Christian Age* magazine.[26] Written by Lobb, the children's book was interspersed with sections of abridged text from Henson's narrative. Whilst particular brutal scenes are cut or reduced in detail, the focus moves from the slave body to Henson's actions as a Christian. His story is told – from birth to his escape to Canada – in anecdotal form and each story is deliberately chosen to teach young children about religion and moral choice. For example, Lobb includes a short

[26] Wood, *Blind Memory* (note 4), 271.

section by Henson on his decision to borrow his master's shoes on his Maryland plantation, to which the shoes were so small several men had to rip them off his feet. Lobb adds his own thoughts to the story (as he does with every section by Henson) and uses it to teach young readers a lesson about theft and dishonesty. Everyone "should avoid and abhor all sham and pretence" and dress and conduct themselves in life respectfully; "filth is disgraceful, and idleness is disgraceful; cleanliness of person and clothes, and cleanliness of life, are fair sights before both God and man". Lobb asks his readers to pray and remember "that in the end no good can come of any course but that which is honest and truthful".[27]

Elsewhere in the book, Lobb writes of the "joy and gratitude" Henson possesses when he escaped slavery and reached Canada, and Lobb compares this to the "joy and gratitude of the soul when first it realizes freedom and life in Christ". [28] When someone abandons sin and turns to God, the spiritual release one feels according to Lobb, is the same feeling one feels after arriving on a land where freedom is offered. Liberty from slavery and liberty from sin are subsumed and are collectively interpreted as one and the same. Lobb also relied on the narrative of superior displacement and constructed a work which praised British freedom and support for the slave: Henson enjoyed liberty because of British laws and customs. There is no mention of Britain's role in slavery, the slave trade, or its own colonies, but rather it focuses on abolition and the deliverance of another slave to the safety of British soil. Henson's own life story was politicized to support this narrative and educate a younger generation not only about morals such as honesty and piety, but the greatness of the British Empire, its history and its treatment of racial peoples.[29]

Henson's tour clearly demonstrates the complexity of black performance both on and outside the British stage, and whilst he used the character of Tom to win support and raise money, there were times when his connection to that character grew tiresome. During a meeting in Glasgow, Henson was repeatedly described as 'Uncle Tom' and the chairman noted that he had regaled British audiences with the "thrilling story of his life, the horrors of the slave system and his wonderful escape to the free soil of North America".[30] During the meeting, Henson wanted to exploit this fame to not only challenge the character of Uncle Tom but to also combat the

---

[27] Ibid., 33-41, 119.

[28] Josiah Henson and John Lobb, *Young People's Illustrated Edition of Uncle Tom's Story of His Life* (London: Christian Age, 1877), 92-3.

[29] Henson and Lobb, *Young People's Illustrated Edition* (note 28), 126-31.

[30] *The Rev. Josiah Henson in Scotland: Report of Farewell Meeting and Presentation in the City Hall* (Glasgow: George Gallie and Son, 1877), 6-25.

romantic language used to describe slavery and the fight to end it. He rejected the idea that anyone could discuss slavery lightly:

> I look back from whence I came, and see by the eyes of my mind what you cannot see with your eyes, because you have not been there, and feel in my heart what you cannot feel, and I hope never will feel, and no one can feel it but the man who has had the iron through his own soul.[31]

Henson wanted to remind a white audience – and quite possibly by extension white authors such as Lobb – that no one could imagine how brutal slavery was unless you had lived through it. As Marcus Wood states, abolitionism and descriptions of slavery were often about "white fantasies of black lives and suffering". The "fetishized slave body as a site of torture" became the central focus within the antislavery movement. This pornographic desire to market lectures, narratives and photographs around the torture black people endured revealed an "eroticization of pain" that shocked and fascinated white audiences at the same time.[32] Building on this meeting, and perhaps his frustration with the racial epithet, Henson actively rejected it a month later in Dumfries:

> It has been spread abroad that 'Uncle Tom' is coming, and that is what has brought you here. Now allow me to say that my name is not Tom, and never was Tom, and that I do not want to have any other name inserted in the newspapers for me than my own. My name is Josiah Henson, always was, and always will be. I never change my colours.[33]

Henson demanded to be recognized by his own name and was aware of the constant repetition of 'Uncle Tom' by the press, and even his supporters. Significantly, he began his speech with this declaration and wanted to clarify his true identity and position in front of a white audience. As if to reinforce this, at the end of the meeting Henson declared:

> I have nothing but the truth, the whole truth and my manhood, and they who don't like that may let me alone. I am not ashamed to show my face, and never did anything that I am ashamed of.[34]

Henson was not ashamed of himself, his actions or his 'colour', and regardless of where he went or what was written about him, he would not change or stop resisting white supremacy. Whilst this was a strong theme in Henson's activism that had been present since the 1850s, in the 1870s he denounced the association with Tom because of the ways in which the character

---

31 *Henson in Scotland* (note 30), 11; *Dumfries and Galloway Standard* (25 April 1877).
32 Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 21, 409-11.
33 *Henson in Scotland* (note 30), 31.
34 *Henson in Scotland* (note 30), 33.

had served minstrelesque stereotypes. He did not write *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and was not "responsible" for it, only for his life-story.[35] Throughout his visit, he recognized the press' interest in him and used it to bolster his self-image and performance on stage. He was constantly asked whether he regretted being born African American, but Henson stated "he would not be anything else for the world" as regardless, "he was what he was".[36] Unfortunately for Henson, his rejection of the term would never be enough to stop its usage, as proved by the correspondent's use of 'Uncle Tom' as the main headline report of the same meeting.

**Conclusion**

Throughout his British visit, Henson operated and fought against a culture where superior displacement was the norm. Conveniently and deliberately forgetting its role in the slave trade, Britain invested in stories and cultural phenomena relating to the politicized memory of American slavery, and even began to regurgitate American narratives which included the erasure of slavery's reality and the further demonization of black people. Britain ignored the consequences of transatlantic slavery in favour of celebrating a famous figure – 'Uncle Tom' – who came to represent either a long-dead past or an accurate portrayal of black people.

It cannot be denied that the association with Uncle Tom brought Henson fame, fortune and support for his endeavours, and when he returned to Canada, his debts were paid.[37] However, he was restricted by the association with a fictional character who had been turned into a minstrel joke. He had to work within a racist framework to not only fight against British stereotypes of the character but also refute any insinuation he *was* that character. As an elderly man reflecting back on his life, it is likely Henson knew how the character of Uncle Tom had become twisted into a figure of fun, or one that came to represent passiveness or weakness. As Maurie D. McInnis summarizes, the character of Tom was popularized in Britain as "the man who because of his Christian faith could endure unspeakable horrors, never getting angry, and always [being] gentle, loyal and faithful".[38] Whilst Henson was a religious man and had endured much suffering, he was the antithesis of a passive fictional character, rejecting the

---

35 *Henson in Scotland* (note 30), 33. Jan Marsh also talks briefly about Henson's resistance against the 'Uncle Tom' epithet in "Slave Cabin" (note 16), 37-50.

36 *Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle* (23 September 1876), 8.

37 Ed. by John Lobb, *An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson ("Uncle Tom") Revised and Enlarged* (London, Ontario: Schuyler, Smith, & Co., 1881), 14-15.

38 Maurie D. McInnis, *Slaves Waiting for Sale: Abolitionist Art and the American Slave Trade* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 198.

Victorian assumption he was that character. 'Uncle Tom' jarred with reality: Henson found every opportunity he could to defy racism in Britain (and elsewhere) and his escape from slavery alone with his family was an act of death-defying resistance. He resisted being a 'memento' or a static figure with little control of his actions or destiny. On the other hand, when he was in Britain, his schedule and campaign were in the hands of white editors and benefactors, who would have played on his association with the novel as they knew British audiences would respond to this form of popular culture. *The Young People's Edition* demonstrates how reformers like Lobb were determined to politicize Henson's own memories of slavery for his own ends. Whilst Henson himself probably knew of the dependable marketability of the novel, it is unlikely that he had full control over his tour's marketing strategy and opted for resisting the label of Uncle Tom on a public stage whenever the opportunity presented itself. Resisting entrenched racism was always going to be a difficult task, but he attacked the warped commercialization of slavery wherever and whenever possible. Following the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the 1850s, Martin Delany furiously wrote to Frederick Douglass that if anyone was to benefit from that success, it should be Josiah Henson. The novel was based on his "living testimony" and his life and labours deserved more attention on both sides of the Atlantic.[39] Henson's "living testimony" took on a different form in Britain, packaged, politicized and resold as the story of a fictional character which Henson sought to disprove or subvert in any situation he could. Slavery was deemed a distinctly American problem, and the novel and subsequent plays focused on the racial conflict of that country instead of confronting its own historical memory with regards to the Caribbean and present tensions in the British Empire. This narrative explains Britain's continuing fascination with America, the romanticization of the plantation South and the extraordinary celebrity Henson managed to achieve in the 1870s.

[39] Martin Delany to Frederick Douglass, 29 April 1853, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, New York), <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/africam/afar03ot.html>, accessed 18 November 2016.